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Ferment Seen in Soviet Policy

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WASHINGTON—If Soviet policy seems confused to Western observers these days, there may be a simple reason: it is confused.

Senior Reagan administration officials believe the Soviet leadership is in the midst of an unusual internal debate over foreign and domestic policies, in which some Soviet officials are privately criticizing their hard-line superiors. In the American view, this Soviet debate offers new opportunities and risks for the U.S. in a period of frosty superpower relations.

The latest example of Soviet uncertainty, U.S. officials argue, is the Kremlin's treatment of President Reagan's recent remarks about a summit meeting with Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko. Moscow finally got around this week to reporting in the Soviet news media about Mr. Reagan's offer last Thursday of a summit, characterizing it as election-year rhetoric. But administration officials say the Kremlin still hasn't taken a clear position on whether it favors a summit and what should be discussed.

"There seems to be a fascinating uncertainty in the Soviet elite right now," says a high-ranking administration official who deals with Soviet affairs. He believes that, on the summit issue, the Soviets "don't want to close off any option" and are "wary of denouncing" a meeting and thus adding to their current international isolation.

U.S. intelligence about what goes on inside the Kremlin is always murky at best. But as administration officials read the evidence, the current debate pits the hard-line views of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko against more pragmatic arguments advanced by officials who deal primarily with economic policy, such as Politburo members Mikhail Gorbachev and Nikolay Tikhonov.

The Gromyko group seems to be arguing that the Reagan administration is fundamentally anti-Soviet and can't be trusted under any circumstances. The other faction appears to be taking a more cautious line, arguing that the Soviet Union needs Western technology and modern management for its economy, and that it makes sense to keep channels open to the U.S.—even to a propagandistic Reagan administration.

There is a sharper debate over economic policy. Some senior Soviet economists, perhaps with support from Mr. Gorbachev, contend that the Soviet economy badly needs greater authority. But hard-line offi-

cials, symbolized these days by Politburo member Grigoriy Romanov, insist that reform will weaken the Communist Party's political power and argue that the best economic medicine is to crack the whip and maintain discipline.

Presiding over this contentious collective leadership is Mr. Chernenko. U.S. officials describe him as a weak leader, a "staff man" and "appointments secretary," who succeeded Yuri Andropov this year on the condition that he would allow unusual autonomy to his fellow Politburo members, such as Mr. Gromyko and Mr. Gorbachev, in their areas of expertise.

The Reagan administration may be overestimating the degree of friction in the

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Kremlin and the extent of Moscow's foreign and domestic problems. U.S. officials may also be mistaken if they assume the Soviets will agree soon to real improvements in superpower relations, such as a summit meeting.

One Soviet expert at the State Department argues, for example, that the roots of the current hard-line policy go back to November 1982, when Leonid Brezhnev was still the Soviet leader; the Kremlin isn't likely to reverse this policy quickly, he maintains. This official also contends that policy conflict in the Kremlin is the rule, rather than the exception.

But there are some intriguing signs of uncertainty and friction in the Kremlin these days. Administration officials cite the following examples:

—**Sniping and rumor-mongering.** In recent conversations with Westerners, Soviets have criticized Mr. Gromyko and Mr. Chernenko. Some of these comments seem to reflect rumor-mongering by the KGB, the Soviet security and intelligence force, but U.S. officials believe they may signal a real debate within the Soviet leadership. "Russians all over the place—official and semiofficial—are now talking about politics in the Kremlin more openly than they have in years," says one senior administration official. He notes, for example, that some officials of the Soviet Foreign Ministry have suggested that Mr. Gromyko may be excessively hard-line.

—**The March Switch.** Many U.S. officials believe something happened in March that led to a hardening of Soviet policy toward the U.S. One theory is that the head of the Soviet Olympic Committee,

was telling American officials early this year that the Soviets would come to the Olympics; suddenly, the policy switched. Administration officials also note that the Soviets seemed eager to discuss deadlocked arms-control issues with former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs David Jones, but when they arrived in Moscow last March for confidential discussions, they were rebuffed by top Soviet officials.

—**Politburo portfolios.** Two younger Politburo members who appear to be rivals to succeed Mr. Chernenko, 53-year-old Mr. Gorbachev and 61-year-old Mr. Romanov, recently have gained added responsibility. U.S. officials believe that Mr. Gorbachev, as the senior member of the party secretariat on the Politburo after Mr. Chernenko, is now the No. 2 party leader, with growing involvement in foreign affairs; Mr. Romanov, meanwhile, appears to have taken control of "administrative organs"—such as the KGB, the police and the courts—as well as defense industry. What's intriguing, U.S. officials say, is that no single member of the Politburo appears to have taken control of the most important portfolio of all—the responsibility for running the party's "organizational work," which confers enormous patronage power.

—**Military.** U.S. officials are studying an interview by Soviet Chief of Staff Nikolai Ogarkov that appears last month in the military newspaper Red Star. Marshall Ogarkov made some surprising comments, including a statement that a further buildup of Soviet offensive nuclear forces "is becoming senseless" and a call for greater emphasis on high-technology "deep-strike" non-nuclear weapons. U.S. officials believe he was suggesting the need for reform in Soviet military doctrine and lobbying for more spending on high-tech weaponry.

Analysts in and out of the Reagan administration disagree about how to read these tea leaves, and about whether they imply a gradual softening of Soviet policy toward the U.S. But most Soviet experts seem convinced that the Kremlin—after months of strident bluster toward the U.S.—is now on what one analyst calls "a sticky wicket."

"You have a situation emerging where the U.S.S.R. is run by a gaggle, rather than a tightly-knit body, and what you're getting is a more dissonant information flow," says one State Department official.

Adds a top Soviet expert for several recent U.S. administrations, "Soviet policy is changing, but what you are seeing now is the tip of the iceberg."